



# Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

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August 21, 2000

CERTIFIED MAIL NO. 7099 3400 0013 6477 8758  
RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

Mr. J. Swearingen  
General Manager  
USX-Minnesota Ore Operations  
PO Box 417  
Mountain Iron, MN 55768

RE: Letter of Warning - USX-Minntac, NPDES/SDS Permit No. MN0057207

Dear Mr. Swearingen:

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) is concerned about the existing high sulfate concentrations in the drainage from the Minntac tailings basin. The tailings basin wastewaters constitute the headwaters for both the Dark and the Sand Rivers, both of which flow to sensitive, highly valued waters, including Lake Vermilion. The quality of the tailings basin seepage in large part determines the water quality of the downstream wetlands, and streams and lakes; surface water quality standards thus apply to the wastewater released from the tailings basin.

Sulfate has been identified as a pollutant of concern at the tailings basin since at least 1987. The expired National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES)/State Disposal System (SDS) permit for the tailings basin, MN0057207, under which the facility continues to operate, does not include limits for sulfate nor specific conductance. Since this permit was last issued, USX has done considerable and commendable work in characterizing the sources and pathways of the sulfate contamination. USX also has chosen not to burn petroleum coke at the facility, resulting in a reduced loading of sulfur to the Agglomerator wastewaters. At the same time, however, sulfate concentrations at the tailings basin have increased substantially, while no major wastewater sulfate mitigation efforts have been undertaken at Minntac other than that related to coke use.

USX recently provided a copy of the June 2000 study, "The Effects of Sulfate on the Early Development of Wild Rice," with an August 11, 2000, cover letter. This letter requests that the MPCA "reevaluate and correct the sulfate criteria for Class 4A waters." While the MPCA may consider revisiting the sulfate standard in future rule revisions, this standard continues to apply presently as explained in our February 16, 2000, letter to USX. As stated in our February 16 letter, if USX seeks immediate relief from strict compliance with the class 4 sulfate standard, a complete variance application should be provided to the MPCA.

The MPCA is issuing this Letter of Warning (LOW) to USX (Company) for alleged violations of the Clean Water Act and Minn. R. 7050 at the Minntac tailings basin located at Mountain Iron, Minnesota. The MPCA has sufficient information to indicate that the Company has violated the following provisions of state rules:

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**1. Minn. R. 7050.0224, Specific standards of quality and purity for class 4 waters of the state; agriculture and wildlife.**

Subp. 2. Class 4A waters. The quality of Class 4A waters of the state shall be such as to permit their use for irrigation without significant damage or adverse effects upon any crops or vegetation usually grown in the waters or area, including truck garden crops. The following standards shall be used as a guide in determining the suitability of the waters for such uses, together with the recommendations contained in Handbook 60 published by the Salinity Laboratory of the United States Department of Agriculture, and any revisions, amendments, or supplements to it:

Substance or Characteristic	Class 4A Standard
Specific conductance	1,000 micromhos per centimeter at 25°C
Sulfates (SO <sub>4</sub> )	10 milligrams per liter, applicable to water used for production of wild rice during periods when the rice may be susceptible to damage by high sulfate levels.

Discharge Monitoring Report (DMR) results from January 31, 1996 through May 31, 2000, indicate that water quality standards were violated as summarized in the following table:

Pollutant	Applicable Standard	Monitoring Station	Results
Sulfate	10 mg/L	Outfall 030 (SD002)	553 - 742
		Station 701 (SW001)	26.1 - 330
Specific Conductance	1,000 µmhos/cm	Outfall 020 (SD001)	1440 - 2890
		Outfall 030 (SD002)	1335 - 2340

We acknowledge the Company's past cooperation with the MPCA to address these continuing violations and hope that we can continue to work together to attain a solution.

If you believe the allegations in this LOW are incorrect, please respond in writing within 10 days after receiving this LOW and explain any inaccuracies. Please contact me at (218) 529-6268 if you have any questions about the LOW.

Sincerely,



Deb Lindlief  
North/South Major Facilities  
North District Duluth Office

cc: Mr. Larry Salmela, USX-Minntac  
Ms. Stephani Campbell, USX-Minntac

Address Questions and Submittals Requested Above To:

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